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Democracy Is about Communication

BY HOWARD RHEINGOLD

Every node on the network has the power to broadcast words, sounds, images, software, to every other node: Many to many communications.

This unexpected technological leverage for ordinary citizens is threatening to those whose power and fortunes depend on the mass media, where a very small number of individuals have the power to control what large numbers of people can see and hear, read and write, witness and debate. This new power for individuals to report what they observe and argue about those reports also threatens those whose power and fortunes depend on forcing a narrow agenda on others, zealots who believe they are in the possession of such ultimate moral certainty that they have the right to impose their ideas on others.

The threat of uncontrollable communications among citizens, not the pornographic pictures or taboo words that a tiny portion of the online population publish, is why freedom of expression is under attack. "Decency" is a smokescreen. It's about power.

The reason these attacks on the First Amendment in cyberspace have been successful so far is that few people understand what the Internet is about. The press have done such a poor job of explaining what important legislation means to our lives, squandering their attention, instead, on endless bogus "cyberporn" hysteria, that few citizens understand what is at stake. People are ignorant and fearful, and that makes them easy to dupe and manipulate.

Democracy is what's at stake. It doesn't have anything to do with protecting children from pornography, because there are better ways to do that. It's about the power to determine what people are allowed to say, write and believe. It's not about obscenity. We already have a decades-old body of case law about obscenity. This new "decency" jive outlaws portions of the Holy Bible. People need to understand that this is not about sex, it's about the foundations of democracy. If citizens are not literate or don't have the freedom of open, uncensored public communications, they are incapable of self-government.

Communication power is political power, because the power to influence the beliefs and perceptions of populations has proven to be the most effective political weapon of the century.

There were no modern democracies, where entire populations could truly say that they governed themselves, until after the Gutenberg revolution. Printing presses broke literacy out of the cloistered elite, and when entire populations became capable of reading and writing about the issues that affected their lives, they demanded and won the power to determine their fate. There was a long struggle over the Crown's power to control the press. The American Revolution was founded in that struggle for individual liberties from State interference, and freedom of the press was at the core. This has all happened before, with the ultimately doomed effort to control and suppress the effects of the printing press.

In 1934, the U.S. Congress divided up the spectrum, created the FCC, and built the political regime that governed telecommunications regulation in the US through the maturation of radio and television, and the birth of the Internet. The Communications Act of 1934 created the shape of the entertainment-communications-news industry that grew into today's great infotainment conglomerates. Among other things, RCA became the ruling force in the new electronic broadcast media. Radio in its early days was anarchic and libertarian. There were many radio stations, all over, before 1934. There was a public debate about the commercialization and regulation and censorship of the new electronic media. We might have avoided eroding democracy and dumbing down our population if more people had understood the legislation of 1934.

The legislation of 1996 is more momentous, because the power it seeks to control, of technically ubiquitous, global, many-to-many communications, is even more momentous than the preceding technologies. The Net of the future will be newspapers, radios, and televisions and banks all combined in one box. Will this new medium, like literacy, be a tool of democracy? Or will it be tamed, censored, controlled, by those who fear the loss of their power to control others, and the loss of the money that flows to that power?

If any part of that answer is up to us, it's time to act. Understand that we've all be malinformed. Understand the issues, inform your neighbors.

Check into Voter's Telecommunications Watch for updates on censorship issues. Support the ACLU and EFF, who are leading the judicial challenge.

Understand.

Educate.

Organize.